

Hoarding Case Study

The case involves a 68 year old woman living by herself in a home which she has owned since 1983. She is currently working full-time as a home health aide and was formally a school teacher for 20 years. She is single, and has no children. She has no other family locally. She is involved with her church, loves music, has been in numerous choirs, and currently sings in her church choir. She seems a quite intelligent, hard-working, frugal person who is very private. She is reportedly well liked by others in her church. From the exterior, her house appears to be a well-maintained 65 year old, brick house in a nice older neighborhood in Eau Claire.

The case was originally referred to the Eau Claire City-County Health Department on November 20, 2003 by the City of Eau Claire Heating Inspector. He had been contacted by a heating contractor who had recently replaced the furnace but was concerned the furnace wouldn't operate properly because the heat ducts and cold air return were totally blocked. He also was unable to install a new thermostat because there was no access to the old one. The Heating Inspector went to the home to leak test the new gas plumbing and found that trash was piled five feet high in the kitchen and the fire load was incredible.

After a number of attempts by the Health Department, Fire Inspector, and a Social Worker with the Eau Claire Department of Human Services to make contact with her it became obvious she was not going to respond to our inquiries. She finally did contact the Social Worker but gave numerous excuses as to why she couldn't make an appointment for us to make a home visit. On December 15, 2003 a meeting of the Dangerous Living Conditions Committee was convened to discuss how to proceed with this case. The committee is an interagency team formed to collectively address dangerous living conditions in the home environment which may result in the occupants' lives being seriously threatened. The occupant was invited to attend the meeting by a representative of the Police Department and she did attend. The concerns of the committee were presented and she agreed to allow an inspection of her home. The home was inspected that same morning by the Social Worker and the Fire, Heating, and Health Inspectors. The dwelling was placarded as unfit for human habitation by the Health and Fire Inspectors due to the huge fire load and unsafe conditions.

She initially stayed with a neighbor lady and later moved into a motel room where she still resides. The assistant City Attorney took a personal interest in the case (they were members of the same church) and organized a group from the church to help clean the home. The woman was quite resistant to this help but did finally agree. The Human Services Department paid for a 30 cubic yard dumpster which the church group filled twice.

A re-inspection on June 23, 2004 found the first floor was reasonably cleared, however, the basement and second floor had not been touched and she refused any further help. She felt the church group had invaded her privacy and may have thrown out items of importance, although in reality they were very careful and sorted out important papers, etc. The most recent reinspection of November 3, 2004 found no improvements since June and the basement and second floor remain exactly as they were a year previously. She claimed she was working on these areas herself. There is little reason to hope she can accomplish this on her own. The kitchen was actually regressing even though she isn't living there. She had begun to stack up a new pile of newspapers in front of the kitchen stove. The home currently continues to be placarded and she continues to live in a motel.